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LETTER ON AN OSTRACON

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The ostrakon published below belongs to the Collection “Association Bible et Civilisations” (Jerusalem), formerly known as Collection “Kauffmann Jean-Guy”.¹ Its origin is presumed to be Egypt.² It contains ten incomplete lines of a Greek letter written on the convex side. Letters are often written on an ostrakon.³

The potsherd is ca. 11 cm wide, ca. 11 cm high and has a thickness of 0.4–0.9 cm. The convex side of the ostrakon (the outside of the original pot) has a rough grayish surface. Beneath that an orange-brown layer is visible along the upper and lower sides and showing through in the form of small orange-brown dots all over the remaining surface. The back is ribbed, grayish-brown and not inscribed. The ink is deep black but some letters are faded. The ostrakon is probably broken along the top, and certainly broken off at the left and right; part of the original bottom seems to be preserved. If the restoration λαμ[βάλνει]ν for lines 4–5 is accepted (see commentary below), not much would be missing from the right and left sides of the ostrakon at mid height (l. 6). The supplement in lines 8–9 must be longer and may be divided over the lines as follows: Διὸ γράλω σοι ἕν]α εἰδή. The lacuna at the upper left may also be widening towards the top. So possibly one narrow triangle, widening towards the top, would have broken off from the right side, and two triangles, only just meeting in the middle and widening one towards the top and the other towards the bottom, would be broken off from the left side. The dots in the transcription below only reflect a possible estimate of the size of the lost parts of the ostrakon.

The handwriting is clear and regular and shows no ligatures, except in εἰ. The greeting and date (l. 10) seem to be written in a different, more cursive hand and with slightly lighter ink. The peculiar form of *epsilon* in the combination εἰ (l. 7, 8 and 9, almost like a crooked *omega*), reminds one of those in *CPR V* 1 (66 CE). The overall appearance of the handwriting is reminiscent of, e.g., the letter *O. Berenike II* 193 (50–75 CE).⁴ So perhaps the handwriting may be dated to the second half of the first century CE.

The content of the letter remains unclear, as often with private letters, even when they are complete. The lack of personal greetings on this ostrakon may point to a business letter. In any case, business and personal matters were not clearly distinguished in letters from antiquity.⁵ Lines 2 and 7 seem to contain a reference to an ὀρνιθών, a ‘poultry-house’ (*LSJ*) or rather, based on the papyrological attestations, a ‘chicken farm’.⁶ Chickens, ὀρνιθεῖς, were a popular special food for religious and private festivals and for the copious dinners of the wealthy, and are often mentioned in letters and accounts, where chickens are said to be eaten, ordered, delivered or sold. Attestations of chicken farms, however, are very rare.⁷

In lines 3–5 the addressee seems to be told ‘to either be confident’ ‘or to take for me two-thirds (?)’. Amounts of ‘one’ and ‘three’ may be found in lines 7–8. The repetition of διὸ γράλω σοι (l. 6 and 8–9) in

¹ I thank Mr. Jean-Guy Kauffmann for making the ostrakon available to me for study and publication. See the image at http://www.exposition-biblique.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=239:ostrakon-grec&catid=33:liste-archeo&Itemid=10 (accessed October 2014).

² Hélène Cuvigny, whom I thank for reading a draft of this article, thinks it possible that the ostrakon is a sherd of an Aswan amphora, of which many are found in the Eastern desert from the 1st and early 2nd century CE.

³ Hundreds of letters on ostraca are found in papyri.info by performing a search for ‘Brief’ and ‘Ostrakon’ in the metadata; e.g. in the recent editions *O. Berenike II*, *O. Claud. I*, II, IV, *O. Did.*, *O. Douch I–V*, *O. Heid.*, *O. Kell.*, *O. Krok.*, *O. Trim.*

⁴ For images see papyri.info.

⁵ Delphine Nachtergaele, *The Asklepiades and Athenodoros Archives: A Case Study of a Linguistic Approach to Papyrus Letters, Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 53 (2013) 269–293, esp. 270, n. 7.

⁶ Geneviève Husson, *Oikia* (1983) 216–217: “Ἰὸρνιθών apparaît comme une installation importante”.

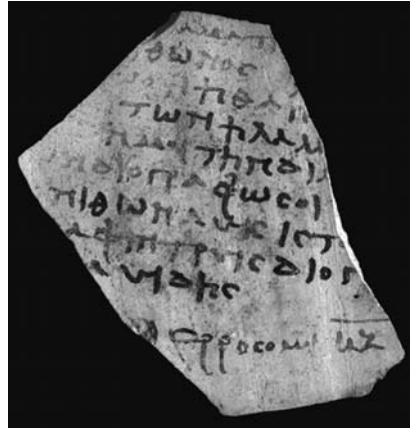
⁷ An ὀρνιθών is found in two Oxyrhynchite leases, *P. Mich.* XVIII 788, 12 (173 CE) and *P. Oxy.* IX 1207, 4 (175/176 CE, cf. *BL* XI 148), where 7 arouras of a former camel-stable are turned into a chicken farm; further in the list of buildings *P. Panop. Borkowski* X 17 = *SB* XXIV 16000, 342 (Panopolis, early IV CE). An ὀρνιθώνος ἄμφοδον of Arsinoiton polis is attested in *SB* XVIII 13261, 9 (VI/VII CE) and *Stud. Pal.* VIII 790, 3 (VI CE). See H.-J. Drexhage, *Einige Bemerkungen zu Geflügelzucht und -handel im römischen und spätantiken Ägypten nach den griechischen Papyri und Ostraka*, I: Hühner, *Münstersche Beiträge zur antiken Handelsgeschichte* 20 (2001) 81–95 with further literature.

this short letter is awkward. Perhaps the writer had already started his last sentence (διὸ γράφω σοι, l. 6), suddenly remembered a message he still had to add (l. 6–8), and then wrote διὸ γράφω σοι ἵνα εἰδῇς again, and now complete, in lines 8–9: ‘Therefore I write to you, so that you know.’ The letter ends with the usual greeting in probably the sender’s own hand, with the date: the 27th day of an unmentioned month.

Greek text

- 1 [.....]αματι[.....]
- 2 [.....]ιθωνος *vacat* [.....]
- 3 [.....]ω ὅτι ἢ θαρρ[.....]
- 4 [.....]των ἢ λαμ[.....]
- 5 [.....]ν μοι τὴν διμ[.....]
- 6 [.....]ν. Διὸ γράφω σοι, [.....]
- 7 [.....]νιθωνα εἰς, ἰς τὸ[ν]
- 8 [.....]αφιν τρεῖς. Διὸ γρά[.....]
- 9 [φω σοι ἵνα] εἰδῇς. *vacat*
- 10 [*vacat*] (H2) Ἐρροσό μοι. κζ̄.

7. ἰς read εἰς 10. read ἔρρωσο



Commentary

1.]αματι[: possibly part of a personal name, e.g. Δ]αμᾶτι or a form of the Latin name Ἀμάτιος. This line, which may have been the first line of the letter, may have ended with χαίρειν or χαί(ρ)ειν in the lacuna.
2. [.....]ιθωνος: probably the same word as in line 7, see below. If ὀρν]ιθῶνος, the letter may have started with [περὶ τοῦ ὀρν]ιθῶνος, ‘about the chicken farm’. If Π]ιθωνος, this may have been a patronymicon of the sender or addressee of the letter and the trace at the end of the line might be from χ[αί(ρ)ειν]. Patronymica are, however, seldom found in letters on ostraca.
- *vacat* [.....]: maybe the beginning of a *gamma* (straight in γράφω, l. 6 but also curved in γρά[.....], l. 8), or part of a *my* (cf. λαμ, l. 4), of a *tau* (cf. τὸ[ν], l. 7), or perhaps of a *chi* (not preserved elsewhere in the text).
- 2–3. *vacat* [.....][.....]ω ὅτι: it is tempting to restore γ[ινώσκ]ειν σε θέλ]ω ὅτι, ‘I want to let you know’, which is a frequent starting phrase for letters. However, as Andrea Jördens kindly remarked, this phrase normally introduces something that was happening or had already happened at the time of writing. Moreover this restoration would be too long for the expected space in the lacuna, if λαμ[βάνει]ν in lines 4–5 is accepted. So perhaps rather restore a phrase like δηλ]ῶ ὅτι, ‘I make clear that’, which is, however, not (yet) attested as the start of a letter on papyrus or ostracum (papyri.info accessed October 2014). The phrase ‘I make clear that’ is then followed by two infinitives, which may have been used for third person imperatives, cf. B. G. Mandilaras, *The Verb in the Greek Non-Literary Papyri* (1973) 316–319. If so, translate ‘I make clear, that one should - - -’.
3. ἢ θαρρ[.....]: perhaps restore an infinitive, ἢ θαρρ[εῖν], to correspond with the presumed ἢ λαμ[βάνει]ν in lines 4–5, ‘either be confident’ - - - ‘or take’ - - -.
4. [.....]των: perhaps [περὶ α]ὐτῶν, ‘about them’, or [περὶ πᾶ]ντων, ‘about all’. A small vertical ink trace may be part of either *ypsilon* or *ny*. The supplement can be longer than that of the next line when the lacuna is getting wider towards the top (cf. also the note above on the restoration of l. 2–3).
- 4–5. λαμ[.....][.....]ν: λαμ[βάνει]ν suggests itself, although the supplement seems a bit short. A longer form of the same verb (λαμβανόντων?) is difficult to fit into the context. Other words, formed on the stem of λαμπ-, ‘light’, seem less likely, but anything could be mentioned in a letter like this. No traces of ink are preserved before the final *ny*.
5. μοι: ‘for me’ or *dativus ethicus* (or perhaps read μου).
- 5–6. τὴν διμ[.....][.....]ν: possibly τὴν διμ[ουρί]αν (I thank Andrea Jördens for this suggestion). Ἡ διμορία (‘two-thirds’, *LSJ*) is attested twice in papyri from about the same period: in BGU I 136 = *Mitteis*,

Chrest. 86, 8 (135 CE) and *SB XXIV* 15920, 131, 132 (87–103 CE) (DDbDP accessed December 2014). Τὴν δίδυμ[η]ν (‘period of two months’) seems too short.

6. [. . .]: probably [ἰς], read εἰς, as in line 7.
7. [. . . .] γιθωνα: it is difficult to decide if the first readable letter is a *pi* (of which no other examples are preserved in this text) or a *ny* (the *ny* of τήν in line 5 has a similar horizontal stroke). Reading *pi* would result in the Greek personal name Πίθων, which is attested in four papyri.⁸ However, restoring [ἰς | τὸ]ν Πίθωνα, ‘towards Pithon’, would not fill the expected lacuna to the left. For this reason, the reading of *ny* for the first letter is preferred: in that case the word ὀρνιθών, ‘chicken farm’ (suggested by Hélène Cuvigny), can be read/supplied. The supplement [ἰς | τὸν ὀρνιθῶνα εἰς, ‘to the chicken farm, one’, corresponding with ἰς τὸ[ν |] αφιν τρεῖς, ‘to the - - -, three’, in the next line, would match the size of the presumed gap. The tiny trace of ink near the edge of the ostrakon would be compatible with many letters, including the *rho*. For ὀρνιθών see further the introduction above with footnotes 6–7.
- 7–8. εἰς - - - τρεῖς: it remains unknown what was counted here, perhaps chickens, εἰς ὄρνις / τρεῖς ὄρνιθες?
8. [.] αφιν: perhaps σκ[α]φίν, ‘boat’, or σκ[α]φιν, read σκάφιον, ‘small boat’, preceded by a short adjective or pronoun (e.g. ἐμόν), ‘to my boat, three’? One could also think of a personal name with its accusative ending in -αφιν, read -αφιον, such as Εὐγράφιος, Χρυσάφιος, Καλάφιος or Ἐλάφιος.
- 8–9. διὸ γράφω σοι ἵνα εἰδῇς: ‘therefore I write to you, so that you know’ is a common expression in letters. In most cases ἵνα εἰδῇς is written with elision: ἵν’ εἰδῇς, but ἵνα is also regularly written in full (e.g. in the early Roman letters *O. Claud.* II 383, 5; *O. Krok.* I 11, 10; *P. Köln* IX 370, 4–5; *P. Oxy.* II 299, 5).
10. ἔρρωσο, read ἔρρωσο: ‘farewell’. The spelling ἔρρωσο instead of ἔρρωσο is found in five letters (three on ostraca) from the 1st–2nd centuries CE (*O. Did.* 430, *O. Florida* 5, *O. Krok.* I 96, *P. Bad.* II 35, *P. Graux* II 23), and in one business letter of the Ptolemaic period (*P. Heid.* VI 358, after 210 BCE?).⁹ For the interchange of *omicron* and *omega* see F. T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods, Vol. I* (1976) 275–277. The extended greeting ἔρρωσό μοι (‘fare me well’) is attested in 38 letters dating from the Roman period until ca. 400 CE (papyri.info accessed October 2014).
- κζ̄: ‘on the 27th’, the number of the day of the month. In most cases, if letters are dated at all, the month name is given as well. Just the day is also found in e.g. *O. Did.* 339.

Tentative translation, including speculations from the commentary above:

‘N.N. to -ama-, [greetings. About the] chicken farm, [I make clear] that you should either be confident [about them] or take two-thirds (?). Therefore I write to you. [To the] chicken farm, one, to [my boat (?)], three. Therefore I write to you, so that you know. Farewell, the 27th.’

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⁸ Πίθων is attested in *P. Corn.* 21, 193, 268 (33 CE); *SB XVI* 12738 (34? CE); *P. Tebt.* III² 890, 74, 100 (2nd cent. BCE, cf. *BL IX* 280); *PSI XIV* 1402, 12 (125/124 BCE): name of a slave with a dark complexion; here one might also think of a derogatory nickname, another meaning of πίθων is ‘little ape’ (*LSJ*). – It is unlikely that πιθωνα, if rightly read, could refer to a wine cellar, πιθών. The word πιθών is not attested in papyri, and was after the classical period replaced by πιθέων, which is also not found in papyri. The related word πίθος for ‘large wine-jar’ (*LSJ*) or ‘collecting vat’, ‘basin’ in a winery, is often attested in papyrological documents, cf. D. Dzierzbicka, Wineries in Graeco-Roman Egypt, *JJP* 35 (2005) 9–91, esp. 64–73. There is, however, no reason to assume that πιθών is a variant form of πίθος, like ληνών of ληνός.

⁹ Looking at the online image of *P. Heid.* VI 358, it seems that in this last case, not an *omicron* but an *omega* was written, cf. the *omega*’s in l. 5, 8, 11.